

Message Text

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ACTION AF-08

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07 L-03
NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 MCT-01
OC-06 CCO-00 OPR-02 A-01 SY-05 PC-01 AID-05 /075 W
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R 181342Z JAN 77
FM AMEMBASSY LAGOS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8686
AMEMBASSY COTONOU
INFO AMEMBASSY LOME
AMEMBASSY NIAMEY

C O N F I D E N T I A L LAGOS 0544

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINS, PINT, PFOR, DN, NI, US
SUBJECT: BENINESE ENVOY'S COMMENTS ON COUP ATTEMPT

1. SUMMARY. DURING COURTESY CALL JANUARY 18 BY AMBASSADOR
EASUM AND COTONOU DCM THOMPSON BENIN'S AMBASSADOR TO NIGERIA
PROVIDED ACCOUNT OF JANUARY 16 MERCENARY ATTACK. PRUDENCIO
PROMISED TO ASSIST IN LOCATING CRO DAVIS AND TO KEEP US INFORMED
OF IMPORTANT DEVELOPMENTS. END SUMMARY.

2. AT OUR REQUEST BENINESE AMBASSADOR TO LAGOS, EUSTACHE
PRUDENCIO, RECEIVED AMBASSADOR EASUM AND COTONOU DCM THOMPSON TO
DISCUSS SITUATION IN BENIN. HIS ACCOUNT OF ATTACK FOLLOWS:
AN AIRCRAFT, WHICH PRUDENCIO DESCRIBED SIMPLY AS "AVIO DE
GUERRE," LANDED EARLY SUNDAY MORNING AT COTONOU AIRPORT AND
DEPOSITED APPROXIMATELY 150 ARMED MEN WHO BEGAN TO FIGHT WAY
TOWARD PRESIDENTIAL PALACE. ALTHOUGH CRIPPLED BY GUNFIRE,
PLANE WAS FORCED BY GPRB TO TAKE OFF AGAIN, PERHAPS IN ORDER TO
KEEP ANY ADDITIONAL MERCENARIES FROM DISEMBARKING OR TO KEEP
IT FROM RESCUING FLEEING ATTACKERS. LOCAL FORCES ENGAGED
MERCENARIES IN COMBAT BUT WERE UNABLE TO PREVENT INVADERS
FROM REACHING PEOPLE'S CONGRESS FACING WESTERN SIDE OF
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PRESIDENCY. PALACE GUARD SUCCEEDED IN DRIVING OFF MERCENARIES,
BUT NOT BEFORE PALACE HAD SUSTAINED MUCH DAMAGE. IN VIEW OF
URGENT RADIO APPEAL FOR DOCTORS AND NURSES, PRUDENCIO
ASSUMED THAT BENINESE CASUALTY RATE HAD BEEN HIGH.
MERCENARIES ADVANCED THROUGH COCOTRAIE RESIDENTIAL AREA
TOWARD OLD RADIO STATION (A FEW HUNDRED YARD FROM U.S. EMBASSY).
WHERE THEY WERE FINALLY STOPPED. ACCORDING TO PRUDENCIO'S

LATEST INFORMATION, MANY MERCENARIES, BLACK AND WHITE, WERE KILLED AND CAPTURED, AND FOUND TO BE IN POSSESSION OF SUBSTANTIAL QUANTITIES OF FIREARMS, AMMUNITION AND FOREIGN CURRENCY. NEITHER NATIONALITY OF MECENARIES, NOR TYPE OF CURRENCY, HAS BEEN ANNOUNCED.

3. IN DISCUSSION OF MOTIVE AND TIMING OF INVASION, PRUDENCIO SAID IT WOULD BE NAIVE NOT TO ADMIT THAT THERE WAS CONSIDERABLE OPPOSITION TO BENIN'S REVOLUTIONARY OPTION OUTSIDE THE COUNTRY- HE SPECIFICALLY CITED THE ZINZOU PARTISANS--AND A SUBSTANTIAL REMNANT OF "REACTION" WITHIN THE COUNTRY ON THE PART OF BENINESE WHOSE ECONOMIC INTERESTS HAD BEEN AFFECTED BY KEREKOU REGIME. ATTACKERS PROBABLY PLANNED INVASION TO COINCIDE WITH OPENING OF FESTAC ON ASSUMPTION THAT KEREKOU WOULD BE AMONG HEADS OF STATE IN LAGOS FOR OCCASION. IN RESPONSE TO OUR QUESTIONS CONCERNING APPARENT FOLLY OF ATTEMPT, PRUDENCIO SAID THAT MERCENARIES MIGHT WELL HAVE SUCCEEDED. HAD THEY BEEN ABLE TO KILL THE PRESIDENT, SEIZE THE PALACE AND CAPTURE RADIO STATION, COUP COULD HAVE BEEN PULLED OFF. A MAJOR REASON FOR ITS FAILURE WAS PREPARATION ON PART OF REGIME. GPRB HAD INFORMATION THAT A COUP ATTEMPT WAS PLANNED FOR LATE DECEMBER. DESPITE CERTAIN GOVERNMENT MEMBERS WHO DISCOUNTED COUP RUMORS AS A "JOKE", ADEQUATE DEFENSIVE MEASURES WERE TAKEN.

4. MINISTER OF INDUSTRY OUHENS (SECOND MAN IN THE GOVERNMENT), MINISTER AHOUEYE AND YOUTH MINISTER KOUYAMI, WHO WERE IN LAGOS WHEN ATTACK WAS ANNOUNCED, WANTED TO RETURN IMMEDIATELY TO COTONOU. KOUYAMI WAS LEFT BEHIND
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TO REPRESENT BENIN AT FESTAC, WHILE PRUDENCIO TRIED TO TAKE OUHENS AND AHOUYA TO COTONOU IN HIS OWN AUTOMOBILE. BARRICADES PREVENTED HIM FROM GETTING FURTHER THAN PORTO NOVO, WHERE HE DEPOSITED MINISTERS AND RETURNED TO LAGOS.

5. ALTHOUGH PRUDENCIO DID NOT KNOW WHEN THE BORDER WOULD BE REOPENED, HE DOUBTED THAT IT WOULD REMAIN CLOSED FOR MORE THAN A WEEK, SINCE OTHERWISE BENIN WOULD STAND TO SUFFER SERIOUS ECONOMIC LOSSES. HE HOPED TO HAVE FURTHER INFORMATION BY FRIDAY, JANUARY 21. IN RESPONSE TO OUR CONCERN OVER STATUS OF CRO DAVIS, PRUDENCIO TOOK DOWN PARTICULARS AND PROMISED TO DO WHAT HE COULD. AT SAME TIME, AMBASSADOR EASUM OFFERED TO ASSIST PRUDENCIO IF HE NEEDED ANY MESSAGES PASSED TO COTONOU. PRUDENCIO SEEMED GENUINELY PLEASED.

6. COMMENT: PRUDENCIO WAS BOTH FORTHRIGHT AND CORDIAL. HE MADE NO ACCUSATIONS CONCERNING THE ATTEMPTED COUP, AND WITH THE EXCEPTION OF NOTING THAT CERTAIN GREAT POWERS" WHOSE BANKS WERE NATIONALIZED BY THE GPRB MIGHT HAVE AN

INTEREST IN SEEING THE REGIME OVERTHROWN, HE DID NOT SUGGEST WESTERN COMPLICITY. AS WE ENTERED THE BUILDING WE NOTICED THAT CUBAN AMBASSADOR, WHO WAS AHEAD OF US, LEFT THE BUILDING WITHOUT SEEING PRUDENCIO. WHEN AMBASSADOR EASUM COMMENTED ON CUBAN'S DEPARTURE, PRUDENCIO REPLIED THAT THE CUBAN HAD ARRIVED WITHOUT AN APPOINTMENT AND THEREFORE HAD NOT BEEN RECEIVED.

EASUM

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